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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (01/04): The new year starts with a flurry of diplomatic activity in the region

Main Stories:

The three dailies front page an Associated Press report on Hamas inmates saying during jailhouse interviews from Jneid jail in Nablus that Palestinian security forces in the West Bank stopped torturing Hamas prisoners last Ramadan, ending two years of systematic abuse. Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad confirmed a "dramatic change for the better" in West Bank prisons and said 43 officers have been jailed, fired or demoted for abusing prisoners.

The dailies report that PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak will meet today in Sharm El Sheikh. According to Egyptian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Husam Zaki, the meeting will focus on the US peace plan, as well as briefing President Abbas on the discussions that took place between President Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week.

The three dailies also run reports on President Abbas' interview with Kuwaiti daily Al-Rai yesterday during which he confirmed information about the possibility of clashes between Hamas and Fatah in the West Bank and noted that the PA will not allow this to happen.

Al-Quds reports that the head of the Hamas political bureau Khaled Misha'al told the press during his visit to Saudi Arabia yesterday that progress has been achieved in the national reconciliation efforts and that Hamas reached the last stage in achieving the reconciliation. Misha'al urged Fatah to sign the national reconciliation agreement based on Hamas' amendments. Head of the Fatah Parliamentary block in the PLC Azzam Al-Ahmad denied Misha'al's statements and urged Hamas to sign the original Egyptian proposal.

PA official daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadida reports that PM Netanyahu reaffirmed that any rocket shelling from Gaza against Israeli neighborhoods and populations will require a harsh and unprecedented response.

The dailies report on Israeli Kadima party leader Haim Ramon urging PM Netanyahu to unilaterally announce the borders of Israel, saying only then will Kadima join the government coalition.

Weekend stories:

Sunday, January, 3:

The three dailies run front page stories on the Palestinian Ambassador to Egypt Brakat Al Farra confirming that a meeting between President Mubarak and President Abbas will take place Monday in Cairo to discuss the latest developments on internal Palestinian affairs and coordinate Palestinian-Egyptian positions towards reviving the peace process. Al Farra notes the importance of the meeting, which takes place prior to the visit that Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit and Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman will make to Washington on January 8 to propose ideas to overcome the current stalemate in the peace process. In related news, Nabil Sha'ath, member of Fatah Central Committee, said that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and several European countries are talking to the US about playing a positive role in resuming negotiations.

JERUSALEM 00000002 002 OF 002

Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam run front page stories quoting Palestinian sources saying that discussions are underway among Arab countries to help facilitate national reconciliation during the Arab summit that is scheduled to take place in Libya at the end of March. Palestinian sources told the London-based Al Hayat newspaper that if Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt, in cooperation with other countries such as Oman and Qatar, reached an understanding regarding the Palestinian reconciliation, then the reconciliation could take place within 24 hours. One source noted the need for the mediator to have balanced relations with Fatah and Hamas to facilitate the possibility of reaching an agreement.

In related news, Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida run front page stories on Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Hamas government in Gaza, saying that Hamas wants to sign the reconciliation agreement in Egypt with some changes. Haniyeh called on Fatah to sign the reconciliation document in accordance with "new arrangements" to be agreed upon between Hamas and Fatah.

Saturday, January, 2:

The three dailies front page news on Israeli sources revealing that wide-scale construction works are taking place in dozens of settlements throughout the West Bank following Israel's decision to freeze settlement activities. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported that construction works started just before the decision to freeze settlement activities and continued following the announcement. The newspaper documented the presence of heavy duty machines and equipment to level the ground and build the infrastructure in several settlements.

Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam carry front page news on the Deputy Head of the Hamas political bureau Mousa Abu Marzouq denying claims that Hamas refused the prisoners' exchange deal with Israel. Abu Marzouq reiterated from Damascus that deliberations are still on-going with the German mediator.

BLOCK QUOTE:

Hafeth Al-Barghouti, Chief Editor of official daily Al-Hayat Al-Jadida writing under the title "Misha'al...the Optimist" hopes that Misha'al's statements about the national reconciliation are true and credible. Al-Barghouti states that Fatah met Hamas more

than half-way towards the reconciliation and it is now Hamas' turn to end the division.

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